

Producing the Field of Experimental Film/Video

abstract

Working from the premises of Bourdieu's concept of "the field of cultural production," this essay describes (U.S.) avant garde media in a structural and dynamic model. Critiquing the dominant orthodoxy (roughly, Sitney's Visionary Film), key concepts of history, periodization, generation, canon, and critical method are examined from a sociological and institutional perspective validating variety, deviance, and dissent. Contrary to the model of an internal aesthetic development, the generation of new forms and styles is strongly linked to expressive needs and desires of new social forces. The essay concludes with a consideration of previous revisionist analyses and histories (e.g. Tyler, James, Rabinovitz) and contemporary ones (e.g., Hawkins, Marks, Russell).

preface

This paper is part of a longer and more elaborate project. For purposes of this presentation I will concentrate the focus on a particular key issue: how we define and therefore understand the field of experimental film/video and "new media." I will focus here on experimental film because it has a longer history and allows for a fuller consideration of some factors. However, knowing that I have a diverse audience, I will tend to acute summary of some points which could be elaborated with detailed examples--some of which would be familiar to people involved in avant garde film but unknown to others. Similarly, I'm drawing on

the work of a well established French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, and will have to summarize some ideas that would be familiar to experts as quite elaborate while presenting what may be quite controversial ideas in a very condensed form.

Thus I'm sure that many of you will think of exceptions to some of the statements I make, but I hope that for discussion we can concentrate on the larger argument.

Some basic assumptions I will not explain or justify here:

- the field of experimental production should be defined very broadly and inclusively and include
 - a. narrative, including dramatic narrative (e.g.. Shadows, New Narrative, etc. but not "Sundance" fn. my article)
 - b. documentary which varies in form and/or content from traditional social documentary (Las Hurdes, Thin Blue Line, etc.)
 - c. new media forms (expanded cinema, cross-media, CD, DVD, netcast, etc.)
- experimental work is often related to social/political movements, directly or indirectly
 - the aesthetic cannot be separated from the social and institutional framework in which it exists; that framework is influenced by (though in most cases not directly shaped by) economic and political factors.
 - While this essay, and my other work, critiques formalism, I want to make it clear that I do not think that formalist or internal analysis is not useful, just limited, and my exception is in terms of claims in which a formalist approach claims superiority or ignores history and context (e.g. much of the current vogue for Deleuzian analysis)

Defining the field, first pass: the discursive field of experimental film

Although by all accounts experimental film occupies a minuscule percentage of film exhibition and teaching, a remarkable amount of writing appears about it year after year. Judging by my bookshelf, roughly as many books have appeared in the last decade on experimental film and video as on documentary or African American film. Perhaps the rarity of seeing experimental work on a regular basis is strangely compensated by extended critical discussion of it. Within the community of people who care about experimental media today many desire a new model for thinking about it. Much of this argument has taken place in the area of avant garde film, for example on Frameworks, the listserv for experimental film. But before getting to that point, I want to review what the previous discursive field has been around experimental film.

I think it's fair to say that the dominant model is the one put forward most coherently by P. Adams Sitney in *Visionary Film*. (Rosenbaum calls it the Sitney-Michaelson axis; however, Michaelson's influence for the past 25 years has been largely through her teaching at NYU, rather than critical writing on American avant garde film.) Sitney's project is "to isolate and derive the visionary strain within the complex manifold of the American avant-garde film" and the filmmakers' commitment to "the major theoretical concerns" of the American avant-garde which "coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract Impressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics," as defined by Sitney's mentor, literary critic Harold Bloom. Sitney then groups a selection of filmmakers along a "historical morphology" which produces large

categories : the trance film at one point, followed by the mythopoetic film, and so on to the structural film. This is essential an internal art history approach to the avant garde. He has an overriding concern with the internal development of form, and (without acknowledging his own presence as a critic) constructs connections where there may be parallels, a lineage where there is sequential similarity, and sources where there are simple antecedents. The critic creates a pattern and imposes a succession that is more important than the contradictions, backsliding, and uneven development that made up the reality of experimental film history. The method assumes an ascending trajectory of formal complexity and implicitly values that pattern. It falls in the same terrain as say, Clement Greenberg's aesthetics. In justification, let me point out that Sitney's method is fundamentally one taken over from art historical research models where dealing with the historical ordering of many artifacts based on internal evidence has always been key. And I think it is clear from his career that Sitney saw his task as providing the critical heavy lifting needed to establish American avant garde cinema as fully worthy of serious consideration in the critical/historical analysis of American art and literature. It is the academic book, published by a prestige academic publisher, which can be shown to Deans, Museum Directors, government and NGO arts administrators, and so forth to say: see, it is something to be taken seriously as art.

Now I want to say clearly that I respect Sitney's book, I've used it for years while it was in print for teaching experimental film, and it is excellent for its descriptions and internal analysis of films, and for its reference to this careers and institutions along the way. It is also an excellent foil for my own critique. But although it has dominated the discussion of experimental film once it was published, it is often criticized.

But, If we look back to how a diverse set of films, filmmakers, and fledgling institutions came into existence for experimental film in the post WW2 era, we find distinctive alternative models. Most precisely, in 1947 we have three different critical/curatorial models for imagining the field. First, we have in San Francisco Frank Stauffacher's museum film series, Art in Cinema, based in a strong validation of the European tradition, but also showing significant contemporary work. The example of validated European modernist artists working in the medium gave the series authority. A very different approach was used by Amos Vogel in founding Cinema 16, a New York city weekly film series, based on membership and thus evading the city censorship board. Vogel programmed a wide variety of work ranging from the artistic avant garde to the extreme and visceral, such as brain surgery footage, and always seeking new and novel films. Such programming itself is a significant contribution to establishing the discursive field of experimental film because it creates an audience with a shared set of texts, a common terrain of art experience, from which discussion and critical thought can proceed.

[insert here, summary of critical/curatorial models for organizing the field:

Stauffacher

Lewis Jacobs

Mekas

Sitney

institutional forms (MoMA, NYFM coop catalogue, Canyon catalogue, etc.)

challenges to the orthodoxy--Parker Tyler, David James, etc.]

Why Bourdieu?

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written widely on culture, and as we might expect, the relation of culture to social structures. Having begun within the premises of structural anthropology, he found a narrow structuralism unable to deal with dynamic changes both within an area of concern and in relation to the wide society. Like other post-structuralists, such as Foucault, he finds power to exist in diffuse forms, but unlike others, finds power interwoven with economic and political power. Thus in his major work *Distinction*, he finds systems of domination expressed everywhere and the legitimating of power differences and acceptance of it (essentially the issue of ideology). In *Distinction* he ranges (from a massive data base in surveys and interviews--the core of the French sociological approach) from established forms of high art such as opera and museum art to popular music, cinema, cuisine, and social manners.

Central to Bourdieu's analysis is a refutation of Kantian aesthetics, which remains the dominant paradigm for art analysis in the West. Kant proclaimed the universality of the aesthetic; Bourdieu sees it as always contextual, situated, and culturally constructed. Kant stands for the autonomy of art and of art perception; Bourdieu sees both art and art perception as bound into social/political/economic relations. For Bourdieu the symbolic and material are always intertwined but one cannot be reduced to the other. He elaborates two concepts for analysis. One is *habitus*, which we could call the "practical sense" of any agent. It is sometimes called "a feel for the game" that is it is not calculated, not a matter of obedience to rules and regulations, but a kind of knowledge, one which seems second nature. The concept of *habitus* allows us to understand the individual artist or other member of the experimental art

community as having agency, but without constructing an idealism of the creator/subject as totally autonomous and without history or context.

Bourdieu's other key concept is that of the field, in this case the field of cultural production, which he sees as socially grounded. By using these two concepts, Bourdieu intends to avoid both an extreme subjectivism that denies the social ground that shapes consciousness, and the extreme objectivism that fails to account for the way social reality is shaped by individuals' conceptions.

The arena of experimental media is not uniform, but diverse. There is a certain logic in its own dispersion and development which stems from internal forces, though these are also influenced by outside forces. Two additional concepts form a powerful part of Bourdieu's approach. In *Distinction* he elaborates two axes of social events and expressions. Based on extended surveys of "taste" and hard data on cultural organization (sales, attendance, etc.) he constructs a dispersed field of culture. One axis is based on economic capital, that is essentially class, reflected most obviously in income and assets. The other axis is "cultural capital," which reflects both education and experience in cultural forms.¹

Referring to the handouts:

¹There are two distinct limits to Bourdieu's analysis which I need to recognize here. First, most of the data used as a foundation in *Distinction* is based on information accumulated before contemporary broadcast /cable/satellite television, videocassette, and other forms of consumer electronics in France. Thus the analysis doesn't account for the vastly increased circulation of media after the government monopoly on broadcasting ended and the presence of African, North African, and EEC "guestworkers" was much more of an open challenge to traditional French self-conception as a monoculture. Second, Bourdieu works out his ideas of a field of cultural production using 19th Century literary production as his model. This requires obvious adjustment when we are discussing 21st Century US moving image culture.

Bourdieu is fond of graphic presentation of his analysis in charts. I share this interest, and perhaps that's a main reason I'm drawn to his work. The first set of handouts are from *Distinction* and give a condensed sense of how he organizes social dispersion along the axes of economic capital and cultural capital. Economic capital runs vertically from low at the bottom to high at the top, and cultural capital runs horizontally from high on the left to low on the right. For those not familiar with France, I've adapted the model to the US situation in some charts made with students in a graduate class several years ago. [second set].

(give short informal explanation--clear up any immediate questions)

The key quadrant for our attention here is the upper left one, marking considerable cultural capital and a variant, but generally positive, economic capital. While we might quarrel with or refine different aspects of the analysis, I think these are useful for giving us some bearings before I talk about experimental film per se.

Finally, I want to present the key chart from Bourdieu's book *The Field of Cultural Production* and my adaptation of it to the field of experimental media production in North America. [handout on colored paper]

Bourdieu makes some important points in developing his analysis. First, in relation to the largest scale field of media production (which would cover all four quadrants), he points out that the more autonomous the field (the less it depends on capital and thus corporate or state control) the more that symbolic power flows to autonomous producers. In other words, it is the very

insignificance of experimental film in economic terms that allows it to have considerable prestige in terms of being “true” to the aims of the aesthetic. Its commercial failure guarantees its symbolic success.

It belongs then to what Bourdieu calls a “field of restricted production” in which the output of films is largely for other producers--experimental filmmakers. And, in fact this is the general case for experimental film in the US. True enough, there was a period in the 1960s in particular when experimental film attracted a larger audience of bohemian and counter culture nonspecialists, but it is certainly a truism that the core audience for Chicago Filmmakers, the Collective for Living Cinema, Anthology Film Archives, and other venues over the years has been other filmmakers or art school denizens. Indeed, one argument frequently made about the New American Cinema of the 60s is that once hard core pornography was legal, the market for the strong sexual themes seen in avant garde work dried up, and only the artists stayed with the experimental core. [We might remember that in Chicago, the Center Cinema Coop--the midwest version of Canyon or the NY Filmmakers Coop was founded out of the Aardvark Cinema, a theatre in Old Town which showed both experimental films and softcore pornography in the late 1960s. San Francisco porn kings the Mitchell Brothers of Behind the Green Dooor fame bankrolled George Kuchar and Curt McDowell to make their epic dramatic film Thundercrack in the early 70s.] At times this audience has been expanded when the maker is part of or close to a particular subculture which shares the pattern of high cultural capital/low economic capital: for example, the NYC Super 8mm punk movement of the 70s and 80s, the relation to feminist activism from the 1970s on, or queer activism in the 1980s as detailed in Gabriel Gomez’s Northwestern dissertation .

Let me point out a few more aspects. In the vertical dimension, Bourdieu places "consecrated" art at the top and "unconsecrated" art at the bottom. The fact of a heavily institutionalized cultural elite in France makes this easier to document there. Clearly there is not the same degree of consecration in the US avant garde. Perhaps we could say that critical consensus and institutional recognition would place Maya Deren near the top, while the unconsecrated end would doubtless be student films, starving artist media, and so forth. At times individual makers aggressively seek to occupy this turf such as Nick Zedd, the NY post-punk super 8 filmmaker in his self-aggrandizing promotion. Perhaps the best single example of someone in the unconsecrated position in recent times is Jack Smith, who deliberately cultivated a distance from the norms and practices of institutionalization, working outside the funding apparatus and much of the exhibition apparatus (railing against Mekas, the NY Coop, and Anthology for many years). But this very insistence on being a low rent alternative turns around in the long run (something which Bourdieu discusses extensively) when we consider that it is the government underwritten preservation program at Anthology which has restored and preserved his work after his death, and which then consecrates Smith as a major artist. Bourdieu discusses this with another key concept, symbolic capital, meaning that the very refusal of economic capital and consecrated prestige can, in the long run, endow a figure with a symbolic power in the art world.

Historically, consecration can also be tied to certain technical practices. For example, around 1970 there was a definite value shift from the previously esteemed 16mm black and white reversal print (sometimes) tape spliced and shown (sometimes) as original to 16mm professionally timed color A and B roll printed prints. Small gauge film remains even today unconsecrated, or where

there are attempts to institutionally recognize it, as in the currently ending MoMA series, only certain technical practices are consecrated--prints rather than original, sound-striped rather than sound-on-tape, etc.

There is some work which at one point or another, or even for a long time simply falls off the chart. An example would be the work of Gregory Markopoulos, who withdraws his work from circulation and asks Sitney to remove the chapter on his work from Sitney's second edition of *Visionary Film*. thus several generations of avant garde audiences have no knowledge or experience of his work.² Similarly, for a long time Smith's work was unattainable even by request to him. The withdrawal of prints by Andrew Noren makes him almost unknown today, and without being a living presence, "a Player," most of Hollis Frampton's work is presently unknown.³

The general model of the field of cultural production does have to allow for some exceptional cases of financial success. For example, John Waters could be seen as within the frame at the start of his career, but able to move or cross over at a later point, while retaining some prestige back where he started. Similarly, John Cassavetes can be seen as moving from *Shadows* to Hollywood, but returning again to a restricted field for his personal, auteur projects throughout his career. We could make a similar argument about Robert Downey (senior), Welles or perhaps Altman. But in general, Bourdieu notes a systematic inversion of expected relations, in which the "loser wins" when the only audience is other producers. This is not to say that inevitably the *poet maudit* is valued--some may

²Modestly rectified after his death with a touring retrospective show in the US.

³Of course most of Brakhage's work remains unknown and little screened, but largely for reasons of the vast amount of it. Outside of Boulder Colorado only a handful of critics have seen it (e.g. Fred Camper).

fail. But it is to assert that many times the authenticity of the person and his/her vision is found precisely in their disinterest in economics: Jack Smith would be a supreme case in point. There is, in the experimental field, no connection to commerce and business since there is no relation of the investment required to the net financial gain. Unlike the field of painting, there is no "original" with its aura to be sold, there are only copies,⁴ and thus no gallery marketing scheme. Participants in the field who have the least economic capital tend to identify that fact with independence

We could probably note the presence of certain individuals who manage to occupy a high place in personal capital. These Trust Fund avant gardists could encompass most obviously, Jerome Hill, the initial bankroller of Anthology and other institutions such as the Jerome Foundation (grants to individual filmmakers). Warren Sonbert and James Broughton would seem to be similar (though less affluent) figures. And on the more documentary side, Emile de Antonio would qualify.⁵

Also moving upward to "consecrated" status, we could include figures with Art World name recognition who then have some connection with filmmaking although it may exist largely through ancillary sales, commissions, awards, fellowships, etc.

⁴Aside from acquisitions by museums and university film collections, there are no significant collectors of avant garde films, and thus no real market. Many years ago several proposals to change this were offered. When Super 8mm appeared as a format, some filmmakers such as Bruce Connor tried out the idea of making Super 8mm prints of their 16 mm films for sales to connoisseurs--it didn't work. The Canyon Cinema newsletter once carried an argument that like printmakers, film artists should make an original and strike a few copies and then destroy the original to give the copies the profitable "aura" of uniqueness which is the basis for commercial art gallery sales. Leo Castelli did try to corner the market on artist-made video art in the 1970s, but the attempt failed and his distribution system moved over to Electronic Arts Intermix.

⁵We should include de Antonio as an avant-garde figure, as Doug Kellner has stressed in his analysis of *In the Year of the Pig*, and the obvious case of *Underground*. Kellner...

There is no real power in the field of experimental media production since there is no real honor or greatness than can be converted into social power in the broader society. In general the field stands against institutional cultural authority, although clearly it has tried to itself create criteria and institutionalize it--most notoriously with the original "Essential Cinema" selection for Anthology Film Archives.

Concomitant with the restricted nature of production, is the resulting (and largely resented) power of gatekeepers. Critics, programmers, festival directors and staff, teachers, and arts administrators who have some measure of control over the spare funding available (from patrons, private foundations, public arts funding, etc.) or resources such as access to equipment, are almost uniformly viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility by many makers, especially if unrecognized or undervalued.

At the same time, intellectuals in the field do have considerable power when categories and values are changing. For example, at times the need that critics have for examples to fulfill certain categories can easily drive certain works to prestige positions. For example, *Thriller*, *She Must Be Seeing Things*, and *Born in Flames* which arguably, offered key examples for certain critics at a certain moment but do not really stand up very well over time. (As opposed to say, *Jeanne Dielmann*, another film extensively written about by feminist film critics).

What then is the source of value for artists (and other art world inhabitants) of cultural capital? Why does society value it? Bourdieu's answer is that in the long run cultural capital acts to conserve the dominate order of things. Those

who are intellectually and creatively adept, but who do not have economic power end up being bound into the logical order of the dominant system, even when they exist in an “inverted” world in relation to it.

[insert section here about relation to politics, artistic avant garde and political avant garde.]

But rather than seeing the progressive politics of experimental media as an always present and always equally available resource, Bourdieu argues that cultural producers do have considerable power in a moment of crisis to define the social work din a critical way, and thus to have considerable effect on how that world is perceived and how agents within it understand it and consequently act. In times of crisis, artist can be the power structure’s worst fear, Pied Pipers who can direct energy in new ways. For better and for worse, many of the ongoing political expressions around issues of the World Trade Organization and in some areas such as the Pacific Northwest, around environmental concerns, have been fundamentally driven by cultural expressions with artists and performers forming a leading edge for change.

Add here. conclusion: key concepts of history, periodization, generation, canon, and critical method.

specific elaboration of key issues in relation to the model. discussion of new critical work on avant garde media that breaks from the dominant model.